

RECONCILIATION WITH LIFE

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ABSTRACT

Namita Gokhale's writings are a result of deep felt emotions which stem from the ever changing forces acting upon her protagonists lives. Some of these forces are beyond her characters' control and are a result of the social milieu in which they live. The actions of her characters reveal an initial revolt against the social conditionings but they eventually reconcile to their lives and its offerings. They are nevertheless survivors. The current study is on Gudiya the protagonist of Gods, Graves and Grandmother, where after the initial revolt against her familial circumstances of turning from the grand daughter of a Muslim Kothewalito the granddaughter of the Godmother of a temple. Gudiya struggles to find her identity. She looks for solace and peace within herself and in the end reconciles to life. She is a survivor.

KEYWORDS: Protagonists Lives, Social Milieu, Gudiya Gods, Graves and Grandmother

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INTRODUCTION

The foremost duty of parents is to mould their children in accordance with sublime Indian tradition. Children are architects of the future who carry forward the age old traditions and legacy. The seeds of spiritual values should be sworn with care and warmth to ensure healthy social attitudes that would ensure camaraderie and brotherhood among people.

Early neglect, abandonment and isolation in childhood leads to attachment disorders and the children have difficulty connecting with others and managing their own emotions. Such children and later adults suffer from lack of trust and self-worth, thus are incapable of building meaningful relationships. However, with patience and love, it is possible to correct the situation. [Help Guide.org]

DISCUSSIONS

The current study endeavours to highlight these insecurities as portrayed by Namita Gokhale in *Gods, Graves and Grandmother*, a novel which has strong autobiographical elements.

In *Gods, Graves and Grandmother*, Gudiya is the narrator who tells the story in the first person with frankness and candour, often in a brutally straightforward manner reflecting the insecurities as her life changes constantly. Riyasuddin Rizvi decamped with her mother. Gudiya's pale-gold skin had been endowed to her by some Afghan forbear or phirangi customer of her mother's. She often thought of the Englishman who might have been her father. She did not even know who her father was, and neither for a fact, did her mother or grandmother. Gudiya refers to her mother as her "wicked waylaid mother". [Gokhale 23] Gudiya, her mother and grandmother fled from the disgrace which a small town scandal brought. As Gudiya's mother later ran away with Riyasuddin Rizvi, she had been left in the company of Ammi, her grandmother, under a *peepal* tree; in utter penury.

The *peepal* tree has been repeatedly mentioned and serves as a constant in her otherwise ever changing life. When Gudiya's mother "sighted her harmonium player, she began shaking and twitching like a peepul tree at midnight." [Gokhale 9]

Gudiya passes through various kinds of experiences that brought about modification in her personality and her approach to things, though not in a remarkable and appreciable way. That is why when in the beauty parlour she looked into many mirrors that crowded the room, she could barely recognize herself and imagined she saw many faces staring back, and asked "which of them was me?" [Gokhale 233] After her altercation with Malvika Mehta, Gudiya resolved to change her name, her identity, her very self. She became a creature of possibilities, unfettered by a past, totally involved in the process of becoming a new person. She had absolutely no idea of who her father was. This gave full scope to her imagination and she became totally consumed by a set of intense and overlapping day dreams where she was variously, the daughter of an English Lord, an Arab Sheikh or a passionate blue blooded bandit who was shot dead after secretly marrying her mother. But finally, she settled on a tragic feudal past. So she decided to become Pooja Abhimanyu Singh, to forever cherish the terrible tale of her parents' star-crossed love. She practiced a series of elaborate signatures replete with flourishes. She carefully hoarded clues and signs of her new identity; a photograph of her father and a disposition towards revenge. Gudiya was continuously transforming from Gudiya to the self born identity of Pooja Abhimanyu Singh. She spent a lot of time conceptualizing Pooja, her background, her family, her past and naturally her future. She had appropriated from the junk shop, a photograph which she imagined to be of her father and set in an elaborate gilt frame.

Sacred to Lord Shiva the peepul tree was a presence and a constant in Gudiya's life. For:

"Its leaves talked to me in a sibilant murmur, and I knew ghosts and spirits dwelt in its enormous gnarled branches. At night I was sure I could hear them, laughing and talking in a perfectly normal way. Sometimes they would scream –soft strangled sounds that only I could hear, which would make the hair on my arms stand up on ends and send a shiver down my spine." [Gokhale 3] To assuage her fears, grandmother pointed out that these spirits were helping them, actually serving them, that they were in a sense their familiars. Whenever Gudiya felt insecure, she felt and heard the presences on the *peepal* tree. One such instance was when after the death of Ammi, Pandit Kailash Shastry entered her room with a group of *sadhus*. This was symbolic of the Pandit dislodging Gudiya, of her rightful place. Gudiya was introduced to the *sadhus* as "...the last legacy of our late revered Mataji" [Gokhale 89] Gudiya felt insecure because she felt that they were real holy men, "the genuine article". [Gokhale 89] Unlike her grandmother, they had mystical powers and so they knew everything about the background of Gudiya and Ammi. She felt that perhaps they even knew where Ammi was and would summon her to come and take her away. Thus, "Fear turned to panic. Suddenly I could hear the sibilant murmur of the *peepal* tree," [Gokhale 89] and Gudiya saw presences. Then, "Sweat beaded my brows, and the room began circling around me. I blacked out." [Gokhale 89]

Yet when Gudiya felt content with life, the beautifully shaped leaves were replete with sap and spirit – symbolizing Gudiya's enthusiasm at her age. Fanned by the breeze, they waved around sinuously, as though pleased with themselves and a deep, long sigh seemed to escaped from within the dense boughs. Gudiya felt languorous and relaxed and strangely contented, as though her brow was being soothed by some unseen hand. She felt she was a little girl again, nestling in Ammi's lap, sheltered by the *pallau* of her sari. She fell into a deep sleep, but when she awoke, reality struck and she found herself alone, in the dark as the shadows i.e. the troubles of life lengthened. It was in the presence of the *peepal* tree with a crescent moon hung suspended over it, that Phoolwati and Sundar got down to the job of

digging for the hidden treasure of gold coins. The *peepal* tree and crescent moon symbolize that Lord Shiva bestowed his blessings on her, and Sundar unearthed the hidden treasure of gold coins. Towards the end of the story all kinds of construction – small shrines, a boundary wall and a *piau*, had crowded around in the contours of the *peepal* tree. But it had not lost its mystery. It had somehow become domesticated, tamed, habituated. Many times, as the day faded and the evening shadows fell, i.e. the troubles of life again showed their presence, Gudiya found her daughter Mallika at play under the sheltering branches. She was certain then that her friends and familiars were watching over her. She would glance up, involuntarily, but they no longer recalled themselves, although Gudiya could often hear a familiar sight or catch the fragment of a familiar song from the rustle of the gentle green leaves. Thus, though the *peepal* tree remained a source of strength watching over Gudiya and Mallika, with the spirits of elders, yet as Gudiya matured and faced the uncertainties and troubles of life with increasing confidence, the spirits no longer appeared as visions though she did sense their presence, watching over Mallika and Gudiya. This shows that Gudiya became more and more self-assured and confident of surviving on her own.

Gudiya's existence was fraught with conflict. Gudiya's memories of her childhood were marked by a sort of sepia tone and "My memories were inhabited by such contradictions". [Gokhale 6] Ammi had torn up the photographs but Gudiya says "I still carry the torn edges of many of these memories, but they merge into each other, they do not match"[Gokhale 6]Gudiya's Muslim background, her mother being a Kothewali and her grandmother a local godwoman, with Gudiya and Ammi living in the realms of a temple all presented a confused picture for Gudiya. Moreover, her grandmother in her new *avatar* was no help in resolving these contradictions. So much had happened to Gudiya in her short life that –"Fear, sorrow, surprise, or any kind of reaction completely failed me. Even memory abandoned me, and it is only from hearsay that I could patch together an account of what happened." [Gokhale 23]

Grandmothers increasing abstractions, her detachment and her inexplicable remoteness had affected Gudiya more than she betrayed. On top of that Gudiya was at the age of puberty, a confusing age for a girl. At this age there is turmoil and agitation in the body and mind and even in the environment. The detachment that Ammi had developed and her preoccupation with some elusive inward journey only aggravated Gudiya's need for her individual attention. She began to hate Ammi with a desperate longing. Gudiya needed to provoke and anger her, and yet when she confronted her and met the calm serenity of her wrinkled face, Gudiya withdrew even further into confusion and hurt. Yet, Gudiya felt secure in Ammi's immortality for Ammi was all she had. Gudiya's life had always possessed a haphazard and unreal quality and when she contemplated her grandmother, contorted into an extraordinary depth pose by the indefatigable Pandit, her last link with reality snapped. Gudiya realized that Ammi had not been her grandmother for quite some time. Yet, whatever continuity and cohesion her life had even contained had been gifted by Ammi and Gudiya wondered after Ammi's death "What was to become of me?"[Gokhale 76] Thus, Gudiya realized later she had misunderstood Ammi's affections and her celestial quiescence.

Gudiya, after the death of Ammi, felt comfortable, quartered with Phoolwati. She felt secure and loved, and with a little exercise of the positive imagination she managed to somehow amend and correct her memories of Ammi, recasting Ammi in the role of a beloved and benevolent grandmother. So much so that when she was getting married "I had the nagging unease of something unremembered and undone." [Gokhale 211] Hence Gudiya sought the blessings of her grandmother and mother by putting on the old *chunri* which she found in the trunk of clothes. Also, after being beaten by drunken Kalki, Gudiya went to the temple and asked of Ammi's statue the question why. Just then she saw Lila, Ammi's

follower, who looked like Ammi. Lila had returned from her pilgrimage. Shuddering with a delicious sense of anticipation, Gudiya rushed forth to greet her. As Gudiya felt Lila's knobby fingers and tough wrists kneading her shoulders in embrace, strength and renewal flowed through her body like a rising sap. She felt invulnerable and unafraid, and she laughed at herself for her fears and uncertainties.

However, it was Phoolwati who gave Gudiya a rudimentary outline of facts of life. She assumed responsibility for grandmother and Gudiya, and her cheerful corpulence gave an edge of reality to Gudiya's strange existence. Phoolwati's dignity, intelligence, perseverance and goodwill gave stability and bulwark to Gudiya. They shared the same fierce independent spirit. Whatever and whoever Gudiya had lost in her mother and grandmother, whose reclusiveness bordered on the paranoid, she regained in abundant measure in Phoolwati's love. As Pooja, Gudiya had even begun to find the smell of Phoolwati's hut unbearable. The compound of food smells and body warmth had been a part of daily life and sometimes even a relief from the claying incense and marigold odours of the temple. Suddenly, these same smells reeked of poverty and social suppression. Gudiya resented her surroundings intensely and longed to somehow break into a new life. When Kalki came to meet Gudiya, Gudiya told him that the photograph on the wall was of her father and that her mother was dead. Kalki said that he thought Phoolwati was her mother. Kalki's words smote her heart. Stricken with shame and humiliation, she looked around at her surroundings. However, it was Phoolwati and Sundar in whom Gudiya confided about her hidden treasure. It was because of Phoolwati's over practical presence, that the ghosts, familiars and forgotten friends of her childhood, though silenced for the moment, on the *peepal* tree, were waiting only for the slightest indication from Gudiya, to make themselves once again manifest.

Gudiya felt a strange affinity with Roxanne, for Roxanne's pale ivory skin approximated Gudiya's gold-white one. Gudiya's childhood passed without event because she never attempted to compare or reconcile her two disparate lives – one her school and the other her life in the *mandir*. However, Roxanne's well – meaning insensitivity drew out a latent anger in Gudiya. The arrogance inherent in Roxanne's charity embarrassed and enraged Gudiya beyond endurance. Grandmother had inculcated in her a fierce sense of self – worth. Gudiya resolved that someday, somewhere, somehow she would get even with all of them. However, it was only when Roxanne was on her death bed that Gudiya realized that Roxanne was the only entirely good person she had ever encountered. From the time Gudiya had joined St. Jude's, she had encouraged Gudiya to believe and trust in herself. It was she who had always trusted and believed in her. Gudiya felt that she had not repaid her faith. Gudiya wanted, above all things, to demonstrate her love and so she brought some ritual and dignity to Roxanne's departure from the world. There was a tussle between Roxanne and Phoolwati over Gudiya. This added to the insecurities of Gudiya for “A more incongruous pair of women would be difficult to find....” [Gokhale 90] Added to this was the opposition of Mr. Lamba, Roxanne's husband, who made it clear that Gudiya's staying in their house was an informal arrangement and at no stage were he and Roxanne planning to adopt Gudiya.

School too had proved to be a disaster for Gudiya. Having joined late, she was older and taller than most of the students in her class. St. Jude's had only up to the eighth grade, and she was already in the seventh. It was unlikely that she would get admission to any good English medium school. Her stay at Roxanne's house had only reinforced her ingrained feeling of superiority, and she had become utterly obnoxious to both her teachers and fellow students. Later, she was no longer conspicuously Roxanne's favourite but nobody had forgotten their special relationship. This combined with her status as Ammi's granddaughter, labeled Gudiya as being different from other girls in her class. Moreover, the other three girls in her group came from disadvantaged but stable backgrounds. They were clever and capable young girls and their

stories were not dissimilar to Gudiya. Yet they were not her and she was not them. They knew who they were.

Gudiya was tired of the tussle for ownership over her by Roxanne, Phoolwati, Pandit Kailash Shastri and Sundar Phalwan for she believed “I belong to no one, just as her grandmother had never belonged to anyone.” [Gokhale 108] Rejecting the claims of everyone Gudiya felt free but alienated and was gripped by fear and insecurities as she was haunted by the past. For, ‘Everyone and everything seemed contained, defined, in context. Only I was alienated and at large.’ [Gokhale 113] However after roaming the streets of Delhi she felt good to return to Phoolwati’s house. Everything seemed to be conspiring against her and pushing her towards greater insecurities.

On meeting, Kalki, Gudiya hoped that he would redeem her, just as Lord Kalki, the scourge of Kaliyug would come riding on a white horse to redeem the world. Both Gudiya and Kalki put on false identities for each other. Gudiya became Pooja Abhimanyu Singh and Kalki too was an assumed name. Their love remained in the realm of make – believe. He never forgave her for their engagement. Behind Kalki’s carefully maintained façade he was seething with a desperate rage. Gudiya could simply not penetrate his hatred, no matter how hard she tried.

Kalki had taken to habitually borrowing money from Gudiya. She had to resort to regularly pilfering small amounts of cash from the bundles of hundred rupee notes which Phoolwati stashed around the house in various improbable places. She desperately wanted to comfort him, and she wished she were an heiress, so that she could shower him with all the good things she felt he so richly deserved. A nebulous plan developed in her mind, she was not penniless. She felt that if she retrieved the treasure Saboo had inadvertently dug up, she would be rich and Kalki would be happy. Gudiya was not blind to the realities of Kalki’s nature, nor had she forgotten the lessons of her mother, the inept prostitute with her pitiable habit of falling in love. In spite of her total and consuming infatuation she understood well that there was something noble and base about Kalki. She thought that she would surprise him at the appropriate time and use the gold to buy him. Some innate wisdom had restrained her from telling Kalki about the gold, but she suspected he was aware of the conditions of Roxanne’s will. However, Gudiya’s adaptability and survival instinct was apparent for she had had many years of changes and surprises and she fell into the rhythm of her new life with a flexible ease. On the whole, Gudiya managed to maintain a brave front, and Phoolwati glimpsed very little of the agony she was undergoing. Gudiya was determinedly cheerful, but inside, there was a deep unutterable fear that this was how her whole life might pass – in indifference, indignities and calculated cruelties. Eventually, Kalki abandoned her and her daughter to make a life for him in the film world. Pandit Kailash Shastri offered to read her hand but Gudiya refused. There was nothing about her future she any longer wanted to know, as she was ready for whatever came her way. Once in a while, Gudiya took out her single remaining gold sovereign and stared at the noble profile of Emperor Jehangir and his consort Noorjehan. As she held the coin, she began to conjure up life in old *haveli* with the hundred and thirty rooms, the laughter and gaiety and chandeliers and silver chalices of wine overflowing onto a flowered Persian carpet. Sometimes she went through the photographs of her marriage. It all seemed far away and unreal. In fact, she had all but forgotten Kalki. Gudiya found it easy to live in the present. Life in Phoolwati’s house had a soothing sameness in its rhythm. Phoolwati was invariably gentle with Mallika, Gudiya’s daughter and Gudiya. Gudiya saw her looking at her speculatively, assessing for damage, but Phoolwati wisely kept her silence. Gudiya often dreamt about her mother, but she was elusive even there. Grandmother was dead, Roxanne was dead, Sundar was dead. “Even Kalki is gone, but the end of the world is nowhere in sight.” [Gokhale 240] Thus all the people Gudiya looked up to were dead. Kalki, her husband, the incarnation of Vishnu, the saviour, the one person she thought would deliver her from pain and insecurities actually left her with greater scares but life went on for Gudiya. Though the novel ends on a note

of deep pain and emotional agony, Gudiya was a survivor for she renders her painful past acceptable, if not accountable.

CONCLUSIONS

The agony suffered by the protagonist Gudiya as a result of the dynamic nature of her life, coupled by social conditioning of the society she lived in and also the unfortunate nature of her circumstances and the people associated with her determined her life and her psychological makeup. Gudiya gradually grew in emotional strength and became more confident where towards the end she reconciled with her circumstances, ready to take on life. In spite of all the trials and tribulations of life she emerged as a survivor.

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